

DIVERSITY NEWS

June 2007

Yvonne Gabonia: In previous editions of Diversity News, we've talked about how diversity management differs from affirmative action and equal employment opportunity.

Greg Alleyne: Equal employment opportunity focuses on overcoming discrimination in the workplace.

Affirmative action, on the other hand, focuses on aligning WORK-force demographics with LABOR force demographics.

Diversity management, however, focuses on EMPOWERING EMPLOYEES.

Yvonne: Diversity management is a process intended to create and maintain a positive work environment.

An environment in which the similarities and differences of individuals are valued, so that ALL employees—ALL employees—can reach their full potential and maximize their contributions to their organization's strategic goals and objectives.

Greg: The ultimate GOAL of diversity management is OPTIMUM PERFORMANCE, for employees as well as for their organization.

Yvonne: But how can you tell whether or not an organization is PERFORMING at an OPTIMUM LEVEL?

In this edition of Diversity News, we'll look at ONE way of measuring organizational performance:

The Baldrige Criteria for Performance Excellence.

The Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Improvement Act of 1987 established an AWARD program to PROMOTE quality awareness, RECOGNIZE quality and business achievements of U.S. organizations, and PUBLICIZE these organizations' successful performance strategies.

America's highest honor for performance excellence, the Baldrige Award is presented annually to U.S. organizations by the President of the United States.

Awards are given in manufacturing, service, small business, education, and health care. Beginning in 2007, non-profit organizations will also be eligible to apply for the award.

To apply for the award, organizations must submit a rigorous application, with details of their achievements and improvements in seven key areas: Leadership; Strategic planning; Customer and market focus; Measurement, analysis, and knowledge management; Human resource focus; Process management; and Results.

Baldrige Award applications receive 300 to 1,000 hours of review by an independent board of examiners. Following that, the organizations who have applied each receive a detailed report on their strengths and on their "opportunities for improvement."

Greg: The Baldrige CRITERIA are designed to help organizations improve their performance by focusing on two goals: Delivering ever improving value to customers, and Improving the organization's overall performance.

The CORE VALUES and CONCEPTS which provide the BASIS of the Baldrige Criteria include: Visionary leadership, Customer-driven excellence, Organizational and personal learning, Valuing employees and partners, Agility, Focus on the future, Managing for innovation, Management by fact, Social responsibility, Focus on results and on creating value, and a systems perspective.

These values and concepts represent beliefs and behaviors found in high-performing organizations. They are the FOUNDATION for integrating key performance and operational requirements within a results-oriented framework, a FRAMEWORK that creates a BASIS for ACTION and for FEEDBACK.

Key characteristics of the Baldrige Criteria include: the Criteria focus on results, the Criteria are NOT prescriptive, the Criteria ARE adaptable, the Criteria support a "SYSTEMS perspective" to maintaining organization-wide goal alignment, and The Criteria support GOAL-BASED assessment.

The key questions that the Baldrige Criteria address are:

How do your senior leaders lead?

How do you govern and address your social responsibilities?

How do you DEVELOP your strategy?

How do you DEPLOY your strategy?

How do you obtain and use customer and market knowledge?

How do you build relationships and grow customer satisfaction and loyalty?

How do you measure, analyze, and then improve organizational performance?

How do you manage your information, information technology, and organizational knowledge?

How do you engage your workforce to achieve organizational and personal success?

How do you build an effective and supportive workforce environment?

How do you design your work systems?

How do you manage and improve your key organizational work processes?
What are your product and service performance results?
What are your customer-focused performance results?
What are your financial and marketplace performance results?
What are your workforce-focused performance results?
What are your process effectiveness results?
and, What are your leadership results?

Yvonne: The Department of Veterans Affairs has its OWN version of the Baldrige Award: The Secretary of Veterans Affairs' Robert W. Carey Performance Excellence Award.

The Carey Award uses the Baldrige Criteria as the basis for evaluating organizational performance. Awarded annually since 1992, the CAREY Award recognizes organizations within the Department of Veterans Affairs that have implemented management approaches resulting in sustained high levels of PERFORMANCE and SERVICE to veterans.

The award is named in memory of Robert W. Carey, a publicly recognized VA quality leader and a champion for excellence in the Federal government. He was the Director of the Philadelphia Regional Office and Insurance Center from 1985 until 1990.

ALL organizations in the Department of Veterans Affairs are eligible to compete for the Carey Award.

ONE organization within the Department of Veterans Affairs that has truly taken the Baldrige Criteria to heart is the National Cemetery Administration (NCA).

Greg: For THIS edition of Diversity News, Yvonne sat down with Paige Lowther, director of the Business Process Improvement Service in NCA's Office of Finance and Planning, to talk about how NCA uses the Baldrige Criteria as a FRAMEWORK for organizational performance management.

Paige Lowther: Like the Carey and the Baldrige, our program, which we call Organizational Assessment and Improvement, is focused on using the Criteria to learn about yourself as a manager, learning about your organization—as a planning tool. It is not a “gotcha!” It's not a hammer. It is a program that really takes the self-assessment opportunity to the next level, to that of, “I've learned these things: I know where my successes are, I know where my gaps are; and now I have some time to plan, and I know where to plan, because I'm not going to waste time on things that are already working well. I know where the places for opportunity for improvement are, where those reside, and I can spend some time doing that.”

So, our focus really is on using self-assessment as a management tool. And that's really what the Carey and Baldrige is all about, as well. When an organization submits an application for that award, they're really competing against themselves. They're competing against the standards of excellence, and how well they are achieving those standards of excellence. So, when we have our Carey winners every year, every organization is a winner. And that was the kind of philosophy that we wanted to foster with organizational assessment and improvement for our national cemeteries.

Once we had the self-assessment tool in place, which looks very much like a Carey application, but written in cemetery language, we still hadn't answered the one component which was very important to senior management in NCA: "How will we know when we get there?" Here's the roadmap. Here's the guidebook. But how will we know when we've gotten there? So, a big part of our OAI is what we call a validation process. And in looking at what a validation process should look like for NCA, we also went back and we looked at what Carey and Baldrige do in the award process, and performing site visits to support award applications.

So we developed a similar process, completely internally, and we have teams of NCA employees who have an opportunity annually to volunteer to be part of our site visit process. The only criteria to be on the team is that you be a full-time NCA employee. And we want you to commit for at least a year. Most of our OAI team members stay for two years, and we have many that, I like to call them "the reserves," who were team members selected three, four years ago, and they still want to be part of the process. So, in case we need a substitute, we have this "bench" that we can call on.

Our teams are made up of folks from throughout the system. We have cemetery caretakers, we have equipment operators, we have cemetery directors, we have folks from our network offices from across the country, we even have a good contingent and a good showing from Central Office, from Headquarters—program analysts from areas like memorial program service, which manages our headstone and marker program. We have an engineer. We've had people from outreach, our outreach office. So it really is a great opportunity for learning, on both sides.

These folks come together, and each team does about three or four site visits a year. And when they conduct that site visit, they are not there to tell the cemetery what they're doing right or what they're doing wrong. They're there to take what the cemetery has reported on themselves in their self-assessment. And we sit down with the self-assessment and we say, "OK. You were able to say these things about your organization. Where do you get that information?" So the focus is on, where is the data? Where are the metrics? Where is the information that you, as a manager/cemetery director, need to move your organization toward excellence?

So we take a look at what they said, and we try and match that back to where they say they got their information from. And, at the end of each site visit, there is a report that is generated that lists strengths, things that are going on that keep the organization moving in a positive direction, and there are also what we call “opportunities for improvement.” And, again, that’s language that we stole from Carey’s. It’s not, not a “you must do this” or “you should start doing this” or “you should stop doing something else.” They’re really opportunities. It’s couched in language that, you know, “excellent organizations take advantage of these types of things, and here is why.”

So, hopefully, once the site visit is done, not only has the cemetery had the experience of assessing themselves, then they get an outside validation of that as well. It helps them, it helps their network directors and network staff, and it also helps our senior leadership here in Central Office: to create action plans, to allocate resources, to find areas of common success, and problem areas that are common across the country, And, once that is done, then all of that gets fed back, and you go on to the next cycle. So, it’s continual learning, based on continuous assessment toward continuous success.

Greg: Way to go, NCA!

Yvonne: Yeah! For more information about the Carey Award Program, visit the Web site of VA’s Office of Policy, Planning, and Preparedness: www.va.gov/op3

For additional information on the Baldrige Award Program, visit the Web site of the National Institute of Standards and Technology: baldrige.nist.gov

Greg: But that’s all we have time for in THIS edition of Diversity News. We appreciate your watching, and we hope you’ll tune in again next month.

Until then, for more frequent updates of diversity news, sign up for our weekly e-mail news service: NewsLink.

Just send an e-mail message to dmeeo@va.gov, with the words SUBSCRIBE NEWS in the subject line.

Yvonne: And check out our bimonthly newsletter, Diversity@Work, available as a download on our Web site or by e-mail from our office.

Also, we want to hear from YOU! If you’d like to share your story ideas, comments, or suggestions, please e-mail us at dmeeo@va.gov with the words “Diversity News” in the subject line.

Until next time...

Both: Have a great month!